Parent-Child Relationships in Conditions of Urban Poverty: Protection, Care, and Neglect of Infants and Toddlers

Policy Brief

Laura Frame, M.S.W., Ph.D.

September, 2001

This project was supported by a grant from the California Social Work Education Center, with additional assistance from the Stuart Foundations and the Urban Institute
Background and Significance

Child neglect cases constitute the bulk of the child welfare services caseload (Berrick, Needell, Barth, & Jonson-Reid, 1998; USDHHS, 1999), and most of these children’s families are living in poverty (Jones & McCurdy, 1992; Pelton, 1989; USDHHS, 1996). Although the link between poverty and child neglect has been consistently documented in the research literature, the relationship lacks an adequate explanation (Crittenden, 1999). Existing theoretical models of neglect (e.g., Belsky & Vondra, 1989; Cicchetti & Rizley, 1981; Pelton, 1994; Polansky, Chalmers, Buttenweiser & Williams, 1981), while they offer important insights into the nature of the problem, neither adequately account for poverty’s role in neglect, nor for the variation in parenting quality within the low-income population. These theoretical limitations need to be overcome in order to design and deliver effective, appropriately targeted interventions for poor, neglecting families.

This study sought to address these limitations by examining the role(s) played by urban poverty in parent-child relationship quality, and incorporating the findings into a working theoretical model. It used qualitative methods to describe several aspects of parent-child relationships in a poverty sample, focusing on relationships between conditions of urban poverty, a parent’s subjective experience of those socioeconomic conditions, and the parent’s provision of care to and protection of their infant or toddler. The study was embedded in the design of an empirically-based training curriculum for social workers, focused on the experiences of families’ involvement with both the welfare and child welfare systems.
The study employed ethnographic methods with 10 families living in a poor, urban community in the western United States. Each family had at least one infant or toddler. All the families received public welfare as their primary source of income, and the majority of the sample had been involved with the public child welfare system for reasons of neglect. In multiple meetings over the course of a year, the researcher, as an observer-participant, focused data collection on issues related to parent-child relationships and life in conditions of urban poverty. Interviews and extensive researcher observations were audiotaped and transcribed. This yielded micro-level data on the interactions between parents and children, and detailed narratives about parents’ experiences of living and parenting in conditions of poverty, as well as data that tracked consistency and change in families’ lives over time.

Key Findings

Parents must mediate conditions of poverty that are both concretely real, and psychologically experienced. Parental psychological strengths and limitations, and the exigencies that accompany life in urban poverty, operate in a dynamic and mutually influential fashion. Parents subjectively experience many poverty-related conditions not just as stressors, but also as threats to their capacities to provide for, protect, and simply be with their children. Urban poverty influences parents’ sense of self as caregivers, and their beliefs about relationships with their children. Conditions of poverty are present, as well, in the concrete, moment-to-moment realities of caregiving, influencing the form and intensity of the demands placed on parents and the dangers to their children. Micro-level interactions or “caregiving moments,” and the ways that parents think and feel about caregiving in conditions of poverty, appear to be related.
Conditions of urban poverty generate specific kinds of psychological distress. Parents living in poverty often feel burdened, depressed or anxious about many aspects of their lives, such as the frustrations involved in relying on an impersonal, unpredictable welfare bureaucracy as an income source. But parents also experience a significant source of distress located at the intersection between poverty and their personal psychology of caregiving. This includes a sense of difficulty providing the necessities of life for one’s children; an awareness of providing limited opportunities for children; an experience of having limited time, physical energy or emotional availability due to the competing demands faced by low-income parents; impediments to protecting one’s children from harm in the environment; and effects on the parent’s sense of their child’s future, including a foreshortened sense of that future.

Variability in parenting quality may be related to the capacity to process poverty-related caregiving information. Although as a whole, the parents in this sample experienced poverty-related conditions as chronic stressors, the caregiving capacities of most were not fundamentally impaired. A parent’s capacity to care for and protect their child appears to be related to their subjective experience of poverty conditions, the affective experience that is generated, and the internal defenses and coping mechanisms that can be marshaled by the parent to manage that experience effectively. The parent’s internal response to the psychological threats engendered by poverty conditions may be relatively adaptive or maladaptive, in terms of their parenting.

Depth of poverty has a relationship to both the subjective experience of poverty conditions, and to caregiving capacity. In this study, caregivers with intensified levels of economic strain (in a sample of those who were all considered poor) also experienced
more frequent and serious lapses in parenting, a finding that is supported by other research on child neglect. In addition, the poorest families in the sample, with the greatest constraints on their daily living, were more likely to experience their conditions of poverty as psychologically threatening.

**Poverty conditions can be disabling to caregiving capacities.** It is not simply that poverty impedes concrete caregiving actions (e.g., not having enough money), but also that the experience of trying to parent in harsh, hostile and depriving conditions can disable the psychological capacities necessary for parents to successfully care for and protect their children. Parents whose subjective experience of poverty is one of intense helplessness and/or inadequacy as a parent, and for whom no psychologically adaptive capacities are available, may consequently neglect their children’s basic needs through (a) an inability to fully process information during caregiving moments and respond, and (b) a failure to plan, or to prevent risky conditions from developing.

**Implications & Recommendations**

Both the findings and the methodology that generated them have implications for policy and practice related to parenting and the socioeconomic dimensions of family life. It is suggested that at least two levels of intervention are necessary to address the problem of poverty-related child neglect. These include changes in the policy environment to provide more adequate economic supports to families, and family-level interventions that are tailored to specific poverty-related caregiving issues.

**A basic minimum economic safety net to preserve the most precarious families.** It is necessary to raise the economic floor to a level at which subsistence, as well as psychological survival, is at least theoretically possible. This would include grant
amounts that better accommodate the actual cost of food, milk, diapers, clothing, and
rent, and could be minimally addressed through a federal guarantee of “child-only”
welfare grants for all children in the home. Since sanctions and family caps reduce
household incomes, their true effectiveness as behavioral motivators for the most
precarious segment of the welfare population warrants continuing close study, and should
be held open for reconsideration.

**Welfare programs based in positive reinforcement.** In place of policies that have
negative consequences for children, a system of positive reinforcements for participating
in welfare-to-work activities might be developed (e.g., gradual investment in a personal
transportation fund, which would act as savings toward the purchase of a car or future bus
tickets; or earned “time off” along with family vouchers for department or grocery
stores). Such an incentive-based system could be coupled with the provision of more
intensive, individualized social services to families to identify impediments to working,
and provide training and assistance to that end.

**A program to subsidize the purchase of diapers.** It was striking how often working and
non-working parents talked of strain because of the exorbitant cost of diapers, relative to
their monthly income. A voucher program to provide diapers to poor families would go a
long way toward cushioning strained family budgets. This could occur through
collaboration between diaper companies and welfare agencies.

**Creative use of TANF dollars for families where parenting is compromised.** Creative
models are being developed in which welfare and child welfare programs are
reformulated and integrated, with goals of eliminating poverty and of using TANF funds
to support prevention programs in child welfare (Berns, n.d.; Berns & Drake, 1999). The
design, implementation and success of these programs should be further studied and replicated as appropriate.

**Customized interventions for poor, neglecting families.** The range and variation of parental experience in this sample suggests that to be successful in cases where the care and protection of children has faltered, interventions will need to be individually tailored. Identification of the essential influences on a “caregiving moment,” key aspects of a parent’s caregiving psychology and their subjective experience of poverty, may help in understanding a given case. Attention to these details may help interveners to think about children’s care and protection, areas of parental difficulty, the child’s role in the interaction, and where poverty’s effects are most intensely felt. It may also assist in identifying the primary constellation of problems for a given parent, leading to more carefully targeted interventions in cases of neglect and poverty.

References


